

# When Information Subsidies Go Live: Conceptualizing the Strategic Role of Personal Storytelling

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## Abstract

This conceptual article argues that the strategic use of personal storytelling to attract public attention and gain political impact is insufficiently theorized in political communication, journalism studies, and lobbying research. Claiming the need to study backstage relations among interest groups, professional communication workers, journalists, and decision-makers, it conceptualizes how lay personal stories, with strong moral appeal and claim to authenticity, constitute a powerful form of *live information subsidy* in both indirect and direct communication strategies to influence decision-makers. Extending the classic theory of information subsidies, the article unpacks the particular value of personal storytelling regarding credibility, legitimacy, and appeal and hypothesizes how and when interest groups select, craft, exchange, and communicate lay personal stories to create public support and influence political decisions. The theorization of strategic personal storytelling is based on the synthesis of distinct research literatures and abductive multi-sited field studies of Norwegian interest groups, government communication, and journalistic source relations, heading the calls for more mixed-method, cross-disciplinary research to advance political communication overall.

## Keywords

advocacy, agenda-setting, corporations, government, interest groups, theory of information subsidies, strategic communication, storytelling, lay voices

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## Introduction

“Asthon, a mother of four, thanks the weight-loss drug for her new life.”<sup>1</sup> “Tor lost 23 kg in 10 months, now public health authorities refuse to subsidize his new medicine.”<sup>2</sup> “Ann has a new life thanks to the new drug—‘It makes food less important,’ she explains.”<sup>3</sup> Personal stories about the effects of the weight-loss drug from the big pharma company Novo Nordisk, which have seen skyrocketing global demand for their new drug, are widespread in the news and on social media. Similar first-person stories are published on Novo Nordisk’s own homepage,<sup>4</sup> with lay individuals opening up about their struggles with weight, their feelings of stigma, and their hope for the future. Their stories are not commercials; even if they are published by the communication staff of Novo Nordisk, they could easily be featured as any other journalistic human-interest story in a professional news outlet. They do not only seem authentic; in fact, they are real persons, with real names, who have struggled with weight in real life. They are all ordinary, neither glamorous nor famous or experts, although they all exude a feel-good energy around them. In short, they are easy to like and identify with.

The Novo Nordisk example above epitomizes the use and value of lay personal stories for interest groups and professional stakeholders. Whether appearing in the news, on social media, or on dedicated communication pages, this form of personal storytelling represents a powerful yet under-theorized and inadequately studied strategic tool to capture public attention and influence political decision-making. This form of strategic personal storytelling is conceptualized as *live information subsidies* in this article.

With its capacity to engage the audience and go viral, the personal story is in high demand in the current media ecology. Indeed, the “rise of the common man” in the news (De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012), the introduction of lay personal testimonies in public debate (Schudson 2015), and the explosion of engaging personal stories in networked media (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Hermida 2014) are widely documented. The increased space for the stories of ordinary people in the media and in public debate is often regarded as a good sign of a more inclusive and democratic news agenda (Davis 2002), to the advantage of social movements and non-profit interest groups, as opposed to corporate interests (Naurin 2007). In this vein, how citizen groups and progressive movements challenge established political and corporate elites “with stories that appeal to moral urgency and ‘people over power’ as opposed to ‘politics as usual’” (Vromen 2017: 127) has been the object of appraisal more than of critical investigation.

However, although personal stories do form a vital part of bottom-up popular struggles, a key argument in this article is that the seemingly self-reliant and immediate lay voice in the media and in public debate can be less independent and more embedded in liaisons with organized interests than is made explicit to the audience and decision-makers—and obvious to researchers. Further, the case is made for why designated personal stories have qualities that make them highly attractive information subsidies for both organizational actors and media professionals. The aim of the article is thus to

(1) theorize why lay storytelling has vital advantages compared to other types of information subsidies. (2) Hypothesize how interest groups strategize to profit from the use of such live storytelling in the strategies and alliances of informational lobbying.

Gandy's (1980, 1991) original theory of information subsidies refers to organized interests' strategies to provide different types of targeted information to the news media and decision-makers to "influence decisions by changing the stock of information upon which these decisions are made" (Gandy 1991: 272). Indirect information subsidies encompass transactions where professional sources offer ready-to-use materials, in the form of written texts, images, and video footage to reporters, called indirect information subsidies (e.g., Carlson 2009; Davis 2002; Van Leuven and Joye 2014). Studies of information subsidies that target decision-makers *directly* have predominantly researched how interest groups seek to provide specialized and authoritative expert knowledge, often conceptualized as legislative subsidies in lobbying studies (Ellis and Groll 2020; Gandy 1980; Hall and Deardorff 2006; McGrath 2007; Milbrath 1960; Sigal 1973).

By bringing distinct research traditions from sociology (the study of social movements and storytelling), journalism (the truth claims, formats, and dramaturgy of personal stories), and political science and studies (exemplar theory, informational lobbying) into dialogue, this article extends Gandy's (1980, 1991) original theory of information subsidies to include the selections, provisions, and transactions of lay, living individuals with specific personal characteristics and finely tuned and modulated "real" experiences to convey. Claiming the need to study backstage relations and liaisons among interest groups, the article thus conceptualizes how lay personal storytelling, with strong emotional and moral appeal and claim to authenticity, is used to influence the allocation of scarce resources to the advantage of special interests.

The conceptualization of lay personal storytelling as an information subsidy synthesizes a decade of field studies of the communication strategies of Norwegian health interest groups, the strategic communication of government and public agencies, as well as media coverage and source relations in the field of health and medicine (see Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2018; Figenschou et al. 2023; Fredheim 2021; Fredheim and Figenschou 2020; Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg 2020). Findings from these cited studies serve as illustrative examples and substantiate how and why personal storytelling as a strategic communication tool has a potential that deserves attention and research beyond the health sector. In this way the article demonstrates how multi-sited field studies that transcend traditional disciplinary borders both regarding empirical focus and theoretical underpinnings can provide new and original theoretical insight based on an abductive logic of discovery (Luker 2008; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). The article thus chimes in with the calls for ambitious, explanatory in-depth, mixed methods studies to advance the field of political communication overall (Karpf et al. 2015), as vital as ever in times dominated by new quantitative methods and big data metrics.

The article first outlines the historical background and basic theoretical premises of the concept of personal storytelling as a live information subsidy. It then unpacks why

and how personal storytelling is a particularly valuable informational good in that it provides *credibility* in the form of immediacy and authenticity, *legitimacy* based on appeals to deep-seated moral values, and *attraction* in the form of attention and engagement. Based on this theoretical synthesis, the article discusses how organizational actors can profit from their access to lay personal stories and how different interest groups might form alliances to trade storytelling capacity with other types of organizational resources. Finally, the theory of live information subsidies is summed up before knowledge needs and theoretical and normative implications are discussed.

## The Increased Presence of Lay Personal Stories

The first argument for why it is worthwhile to explore the strategic potential of personal storytelling is the increased focus on the experience of the lay individual in the media and in public debate in recent decades. In media studies based on quantitative content analysis, this phenomenon tends to be defined as a human-interest frame that brings “a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem” (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 95). Experimental studies based on exemplar theory use the term “personal exemplar” to study the *effect* of the same type of personal narratives on the audience (e.g., Brosius 2003). Emphasizing the first-hand experience involved, lay narratives are also conceptualized as “mundane witnessing” (Ellis 2009), whereas journalism studies and sociological research often use the terms adopted in this article, that is, personal stories and storytelling (Polletta et al. 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen 2016), defined as “a narrative form which draws on the personal experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a broader social issue” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013: 7).

Arguably, with the rise of online networked media, the significance of lay personal storytelling has reached a new level. The sharing of personal experiences is encouraged by the affordances of social media (Bucher and Helmond 2016), and engaging personal stories spread quicker and further than other types of information (Beckett and Deuze 2016; Hermida 2014). Legacy media interact and compete with social media by forwarding human-interest stories and magnifying personal stories from social media by picking them up and reframing them in an interactive, hybrid media landscape (Chadwick 2013).

Personal stories’ ability to engage the audience and create revenue for legacy media and social networking sites speaks to their potential value for any actor aiming to get through with a message and catch the attention of decision-makers. However, the increased demand for lay personal stories in the media and in public debate does not in itself make personal storytelling a strategic tool to influence public opinion, political priorities, and decision-making. Obviously, not all personal stories are examples of strategic communication. To make a convincing theoretical argument for why lay personal storytelling provides a strategic communication tool, that is, a high-value information subsidy for organizational actors and special interests, we need to unpack what kind of superior agenda-setting power and persuasive force lay personal stories provide, what kinds of personal stories have this preferred impact, and what types of

communication strategies and strategic liaisons can be hypothesized, based on these insights. To get there, the basic premises of the theory of information subsidies must be spelled out, and the main challenges for successful informational lobbying pinpointed.

## The Theory of Information Subsidies and the Challenge of Persuasiveness

The theory of information subsidies holds that strategic sources and interest groups provide targeted information to the news media (indirect information subsidies) and directly to decision-makers (direct information subsidies) to impact the public agenda, engage public opinion, and influence political decisions (Gandy 1980; Zoch and Molleda 2006). Interest groups encompass a wide range of actors, including business and corporate organizations, professional associations, unions, and non-profit humanitarian NGOs. Based on their specific resources, they will offer what is deemed relevant and reliable knowledge, packaged in a way that makes it easily accessible and useful for the target of the information (Gandy 1980).

The theory builds on a market-oriented approach to information. The continuous challenge for strategic actors is to deliver attractive and persuasive information to the extent that it crosses new thresholds and both engage and convince its target. The message that can stand out from an abundance of information, attract the audience, and convince decision-makers is a scarce resource valued by both strategic stakeholders and media professionals (Davenport and Beck 2001; Fengler and Ruß-Mohl 2008; Gandy 1980, 1991; Zoch and Molleda 2006).

The problem for interest groups is that they per se represent special interests. Their specific aim is to shape narratives, propose solutions, and define situations that favor certain individuals, groups, sectors, and policy areas over others. This fact makes the information they provide susceptible to skepticism due to a perceived bias of self-interest: “the value of an information subsidy for any source is often increased to the extent that the source can conceal the promotional, partisan, and self-interested nature of the information” (Gandy 1991: 272).

Thus, the first key challenge for any strategic actor aiming to influence agendas and policy outcomes is, as pointed out already by the pioneers of strategic communication, to craft information that appears *credible* and instills trust among the general audience and decision-makers (Gandy 1991; McGrath 2007; Milbrath 1960). Second, a trail of lobbyism studies has shown that to be persuasive, strategic actors that engage in public debate need to present a message that goes beyond their own vested interests (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009; Ihlen et al. 2018). In other words, they should build *legitimacy* by appealing to a worthy cause. Third, as brought to bear by media and communication scholars, it is not enough to be credible and legitimate if your message is not sufficiently alluring and interesting (e.g., Cottle and Nolan 2007; Moeller 2002). In a world of information overload, the addressee—whether a politician, a reporter, or the general audience—must find the message engaging to the extent that it merits their time and attention. Expressed differently, it must gain *attraction* in a hybrid media system.

Based on the extraction of these three key challenges for successful informational lobbying, the following section provides the theoretical arguments for why the strategic use of lay personal storytelling holds advantages over other and more extensively studied types of targeted information in terms of credibility, legitimacy, and attraction.

## **Credibility: Expertise and Correctness Versus Authenticity and Realness**

Traditionally, scholars have pointed out the importance of expert knowledge for strategic actors. The ability to provide information with an authoritative status in the form of specialized, evidence-based, factually correct, and “research-like” information is reportedly a key asset. This type of expert information subsidy has been regarded as a primary prerequisite for successful lobbying (Ellis and Groll 2020; Hall and Deardorff 2006; McGrath 2007; Milbrath 1960). The point is to provide information that the targets believe they can safely trust, sparing them the time and effort to keep informed through other channels (Berkowitz 2019; Manning 2000).

Nevertheless, even if interest groups strive to build a reputation of professionalism and factual correctness, journalists and decision-makers are inclined to approach information from a strategic stakeholder with some caution. For elected officers, it entails the obligation to weigh opposing interests against each other and prioritize which one best serves their constituencies and society at large (Raknes 2023). Regarding journalists, studies show that they are particularly skeptical when approached by corporate interest groups or governmental sources and less so when contacted by non-profit NGOs or citizen groups (Berkowitz and Adams 1990; Curtin 1999; Len-Ríos et al. 2009; Stroobant et al. 2019).

Actually, experimental studies based on exemplar theory find that lay citizens have an advantage regarding credibility. Ordinary persons in the media are more easily trusted than official sources, and they are generally not perceived to have an overt political agenda or pretext, as opposed to political elites and experts (Zillmann 1999). In other words, personal stories can bypass skepticism. Pointing at factors such as vividness, proximity, and activation of emotions and affect, studies further find that messages framed in the form of personal stories are easier to grasp and more readily at hand when people make judgments than statistical information and general statements from politicians and experts (Brosius 2003; Zillmann 1999). Moreover, people tend to generalize personal stories to broader issues, which heightens the perceived seriousness of a situation (Andersen et al. 2017; Brosius 2003; Brosius and Bathelt 1994; Lefevere et al. 2012) and this effect might be exactly what an organizational actor wants to achieve.

Significantly, studies of journalism suggest that journalists do not tend to frame lay personal storytelling in the format of critical journalism (Berkowitz and Adams 1990; Curtin 1999; Len-Ríos et al. 2009; Stroobant et al. 2019). As noted by Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), journalists habitually rely on lay personal experiences as “proofs” in their news stories based on their perceived immediacy and authenticity. Lay individuals tend to be presented as first-hand witnesses in the format of an experiential interview

(Montgomery 2008), where the interviewee is cast in the role of an observer, victim, or survivor. The interviewee's experiences are not questioned or probed for further justification; rather, the audience is encouraged to identify with the lay storyteller "who has been invited to articulate a version of what we might think, see, or feel if we too were close up in some way to the event" (Montgomery 2008: 271). This format is very different from the accountable interviews with official and professional sources, characterized by critical interrogation.

Hence, both the standard journalistic genre of personal stories and their intrinsic cognitive effects on trust and endorsement in the audience, contribute to the efficacy of personal storytelling in the form of an information subsidy. Lay voices come forward with a "realness" that experts and decision-makers can rarely match (Lefevre et al. 2012). It follows that for interest groups, it is attractive to have their messages framed in the format of a personal story that appears trustworthy and authentic, framed in the form of experiential interviews or feature stories that engage and convince without critical questioning. This insight makes it rational for them to choose ordinary persons with relevant personal experiences to speak on their behalf. For example, in the health and medical field, an interest group might push lay individuals who are personally afflicted with health challenges, rather than their in-house professional experts, to represent them and their interests in the media, as Novo Nordisk does in the introductory example of this article. The rationale is further illustrated in the following quote from the communication officer of a Norwegian patient organization: "So, when—let us say, Michael—comes forward with his disease, when he talks about his experiences, it has [. . .] so much more power than if I say, 'We know that people experience this and that'" (excerpt from a research interview, as cited in Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg 2020: 1099).

## **Legitimacy: The Need For a Just Cause**

As mentioned, a central finding in research on informational lobbying is that successful strategic actors need to frame their preferred political outcome in a manner that projects an image of being aligned with the greater good and a worthy cause. Appealing to moral intuition and fairness is particularly important if an issue or a policy problem is the object of public debate and media attention. In that case, extensive studies find that organizational actors frame their arguments in a way that appeals to a common interest rather than referring to what benefits the specific sector or group that they represent (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Boräng and Naurin 2015; Ihlen et al. 2018; Naurin 2007).

As with the challenge to appear credible, it remains a challenge for strategic sources to convince their targets about their true social dedication and the match between their preferred political outcome and the greater good. That is, the right type of personal storytelling with its appeal to deeper values and morals over politics proves helpful in his regard. Indeed, the emotional personal story of an authentic ordinary person can make interest-based disputes and skeptical questioning seem cold and void of basic human decency. To have this desired effect, the story needs to resonate with widely shared and deep-seated cultural values and intuitive moral judgment (Chong and

Druckman 2007). In fact, exemplification theory suggests that for individuals to identify with a storyteller's message, the latter must be similar to the audience and, simultaneously, somewhat extraordinary (Andersen et al. 2017). Being similar means being someone whom the audience can empathize with, feeling that the same circumstances could have affected them, their families, or their children. Being exceptional implies that the storyteller should possess quite a few of the following characteristics: appear good-hearted, and if in a painful situation, be deserving and innocent of her plight, yet demonstrate agency that invites hope (Hopmann et al. 2017; Ostfeld and Mutz 2014).

In the studies of Norwegian health interest groups, the preferred qualities of an afflicted person suitable to represent an organizational interest are explicitly described by the communication staff of diverse organizations. Younger persons, women, and, in general, outgoing persons with some charisma, a message of hope, and the allure of innocent suffering are selected over more representative baseline cases (e.g., elderly persons and individuals with lifestyle diseases without a quick fix) (Fredheim and Figenschou 2020; Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg 2020). Importantly, when personal stories have such qualities, they tend to increase the attribution of responsibility to the government and public support for political intervention (Boukes et al. 2015; Ostfeld and Mutz 2014), which are among the core objectives of lobbyists who try to influence political priorities and resource allocation. Afflicted laypersons can tell stories about their unjust personal sufferings via the media. By the same token, they can convey convincing arguments in line with the interests of different alliances of health interest groups, such as the approval of a new life-saving but expensive medicine (in the interest of the pharmaceutical industry), the prioritization of the treatment of a particular disease (e.g., benefiting one treatment over others, such as experimental cancer medicine, represented by well-resourced cancer NGOs), or securing the continued operations of local hospitals (in the interest of the medical professions of doctors and nurses) (Fredheim 2021).

For health interest groups that lobby for public spending or legislative regulation to their advantage, stories framed in a way that makes it difficult for decision-makers and bureaucrats to argue against them or ask critical questions are surely attractive. Office holders often find that they appear callous and mean if they do not express empathy and their intention to find a solution to the problem faced with individual suffering (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2018).

### **Attraction: Is It Interesting and Engaging Enough?**

The third main challenge for organizational actors lies in providing a message that is compelling enough to attract the attention and engagement of reporters, politicians, and the audience. At the end of the day, neither the credibility of an expert nor the legitimacy of a good cause is necessarily sufficient to reach out to and catch the attention of the media, the audience, and the decision-makers. If that were the case, humanitarian organizations would have a golden ticket to media attention and agenda-setting. As opposed to business organizations and corporate interests, their statutory mission is derived from a worthy cause, and as such, they have an advantage over corporate



special interests and professional interests in terms of credibility and legitimacy (Dür et al. 2015). Nevertheless, for example, international NGOs often struggle to cross news thresholds and capture the attention of audiences and decision-makers with information about distant sufferings, disasters, and conflicts. Studies have documented that such NGOs often rely on spectacular and emotional footage of suffering and struggling individuals, tuned to the preferences of a dominant and popularized media dramaturgy to break through and cross news thresholds (e.g., Chouliaraki 2008; Cottle and Nolan 2007; Moeller 2002; Mortensen and Trenz 2016; Wells 2013).

The worthy victims featured in images of distant sufferings constitute a case in point, but the greater tendency to prefer melodramatic conflicts that involve appealing and deserving victims and heroes struggling against a malicious villain is also noted in the broader categories of domestic news, such as crime (Greer 2007), health (Seale 2002) and immigration (Benson 2013). Arguably, the qualities that define a powerful personal story in terms of credibility and legitimacy, as described above, resonate well with the dramaturgy of a classic popular media logic. Here, aesthetics and morals add up in melodramas inhabited by brave heroes and innocent victims, cast in the role of David against the evil, corrupt, or cold-hearted Goliath, embodied by politicians, bureaucrats, big business, or other professional authorities (Seale 2002). Consider the introductory example about the individuals who could not afford the price of the new weight medicine, accusing politicians of not properly subsidizing the medicine, without mentioning the obvious interest of Novo Nordisk in selling the drug at the highest possible price—paid via public budgets. Within the field of health and medicine in general, many patient groups describe the access to appealing exemplars with a moving and engaging story not only as an asset but as a sheer necessity to get attention. Journalists will regularly ask for a suitable case to illustrate their piece and will reportedly lose interest if no such personal story is offered (Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg 2020). Among government officials in the health field, the prevailing dramaturgy of health news is likewise very familiar, epitomized like this:

Health news has to a large degree become a simplified story about the little man fighting the massive system that is only concerned about saving money. . . . It is the most compelling narrative because it is such a classic plot: it is ‘the villain’ and ‘the good guy’. This story affects us and touches something inside all of us—our fear of falling ill, our fear of not being taken care of, that this could happen to us or our loved ones. (Excerpt from a research interview, as cited in Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2018, 221)

This type of melodramatic media dramaturgy is criticized for its neglect of base-rate statistics and complexity (Lefevre et al. 2012; Zillmann 1999). But for strategic actors aiming to create support and influence decision-making, the insight that they need people with specific personal characteristics and stories to reach out in the media and engage and convince a target audience is primarily a useful insight. It proposes a strategy to outmaneuver the media threshold otherwise faced by experts and professionals. From the professional organizations of doctors and nurses, this insight is expressed in the following: “We need to illuminate the human consequences and focus

on compelling stories. The more intimate, the closer, the better” (excerpt from a research interview, as cited in Fredheim and Figschou 2020: 12).

## **Institutional Isomorphism and Organizational Mimicry**

The theoretical argument presented so far for why lay personal storytelling is an attractive information subsidy has brought insights from journalism studies, strategic communication and lobbying studies together. Sociological approaches to modernization processes and organizational change add further leverage to the claim that such storytelling offers an efficient strategic tool for a broad range of organized interests beyond citizen groups and non-profit idealistic movements. They argue that modern organizations, whether non-profit groups, business interests, or government agencies, are becoming increasingly similar (Bromley and Meyer 2017; Uhre and Rommetvedt 2019). Inter-organizational trends such as marketization, professionalization, and the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public sectors exemplify this development, and so does the overall organizational need to provide a message of social responsibility. Business organizations strive to present themselves as responsible actors committed to social entrepreneurship (Gupta et al. 2020; Ostrander 1987) and corporate social responsibility (e.g., O’Connor 2022). In this context, good government, good business, and good non-profit civic organizations all have an interest in signaling their engagement in worthy causes, such as human compassion, social justice, diversity, anti-racism, environmental protection, international solidarity, and charity.

In line with a neo-institutional field perspective, organizations often imitate one another’s methods of signaling moral worthiness (Olsen 2007). In a time of strong personalization of the media and the public sphere, the use of strategic personal storytelling suggests itself as an exceptionally effective and adoptable strategy to achieve the objective of appearing morally worthy. Thus, strategic storytelling, crafted and presented by the professional communication staff of interest groups, will mimic the format of professional journalistic stories. The similarity of the format of the personal stories on the Novo Nordisk webpage and any journalistic human-interest story in the news neatly illustrates how a special corporate interest can mimic authentic style.

## **Coalitions and Mixed Strategies in a Human-Interest Economy**

In the market-based system of supply and demand of information stipulated by the theory of information subsidies, rational actors will choose the most efficient means to pursue their goal.

Accordingly, organizations that have substantial economic and professional resources but lack easy access to suitable lay individuals with attractive stories to convey might form alliances with grassroots or citizen-based social movements that are based on idealistic motivations and have close relations with laypersons, that is, afflicted individuals with their boots on the ground.

Whereas in this way, citizen groups and social movements have access to ordinary persons with a strong media appeal, they often lack the organizational resources that secure a broader impact via the media and vis-à-vis decision-makers. An alignment with powerful professional and corporate interests could thus be beneficial for both parties. The health and medical field provides ample examples of such cross-organizational cooperation. Well-resourced interest groups, such as the most powerful umbrella organizations, the pharmaceutical industry, and the medical professions, form alliances with patient groups with access to appealing personal stories (Fredheim 2021). The phenomenon is illustrated by the following quote from a representative of a patient group:

Relatively often, we are contacted by pharmaceutical companies, they come to us to present new medicines they pitch as significant innovations. And they want our help with pushing their approval by the government (. . .). It is not unusual. Several times a year. Different companies. Sometimes they already have patient cases, sometimes they want them from us. (Excerpt from a research interview, as cited in Fredheim 2021: 106)

The fact that the experiences of afflicted persons might gain substantial attention while their liaisons with interest groups remain unmentioned or toned down in the stories as they are presented in the news or on social media is important to note. As mentioned, stories of personal suffering are not habitually the object of critical investigation by reporters. At the same time, their credibility and legitimacy are closely related to the status of the storytellers as authentic independent voices. Indeed, exemplification theory predicts that it is precisely the status of ordinary people in the news as seemingly unaffiliated and void of any vested interest beyond their own experiences that imbues them with their special persuasive force (Lefevre et al. 2012). This point might give both media professionals and organizational stakeholders a shared interest, if not explicitly concealing liaisons between storytellers and organizational actors, they implicitly avoid a focus on organizational ties, source relations, and backstage pitching and prepping in the published story.

In a hybrid media landscape, where interest groups increasingly produce media content designated for home pages and social media accounts, the former distinct roles of providers of information subsidies versus that of receiving journalists who make use of these subsidies to produce stories are becoming blurred. Sophisticated communication management involving afflicted laypersons may be part of hybrid practices that use both direct and indirect strategies to influence policy decisions (Fredheim and Figschou 2020). For instance, an organizational actor might bring a layperson to tell his or her story in a meeting with decision-makers. Her narrative can subsequently be published in different formats on social media, and the organization can pitch the storyteller in the form of an interview-object to a journalist.

In meetings with politicians, the inclusion of afflicted individuals with their boots on the ground (Naurin 2007) can be an efficient strategy. Actually, liaisons between seemingly critical interest groups and incumbents can be of a more intricate nature than what negative front-page news stories might suggest. Pieces about suffering

individuals can sometimes change the policy window for controversial proposals. For example, a desperate patient coming out against the hospital treatment for mental illness, seemingly all alone, might create momentum for a minister who, behind the scenes, has been waiting for just the right moment to propose a policy change. Beyond doubt, interest groups are not the only ones with sophisticated communication strategies. Communication officials in the central government know the name of the game and look out for suitable laypeople who could bear witness to the results of successful public policies, for example, the *happy* stories of individuals' recovery from misery and illness, thanks to assumed high-quality health services (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2018).

## **Synthesizing the Concept of Storytelling As Information Subsidy**

Summing up: To align one's interest successfully with a message that has the appearance of a raw or unedited experience is a tempting strategy for interest groups. Rather than ready-to-use *footage*, such stories are offered in the form of living persons whose personae and real-life experiences are selected and prepped to be communicated through different channels and formats—to journalists and decision-makers and via stories on social media.

The storytellers' live status is important. To be credible, they must be available, willing, and able to bear witness to their stories in different formats and in meetings with reporters and politicians, and in this way, prove their authenticity. Nevertheless, they can be carefully selected and trained to meet the criteria for narrating a powerful story that yields the preferred result (Thorbjørnsrud and Ytreberg 2020; Polletta et al. 2021). These are analogous to the criteria of popular journalism and prove decisive for attracting the audience and going viral. They also correspond to the findings of experimental studies. Such stories will play on intuitive moral judgment, display spirit and agency, and appeal to emotional engagement, be it righteous anger or feelings of hope. They evade political bickering by appealing to uncontested deeper morality.

The original theory of information subsidies regards information as goods in a market where value is defined by supply and demand. The conceptual argument made here is that this market gives high value to live information subsidies based on personal storytelling. The criteria for evaluation take the form of what can be labeled a human-interest economy. Within this market based economy, the search, selection, crafting, provision, and exchange of personal storytelling, are based on these criteria: experiences and claim-making should be personified by individuals who—more than being representatives of groups or policy problems—are particularly unambiguous in their authentic emotional and moral appeal.

It is a fundamental claim in this article that the kind of abductive theorizing undertaken here, based on original multi-sited field studies that transcend the conventional empirical, methodological, and theoretical approaches of established disciplines and research traditions, provides a genuinely new understanding of the strategic role of personal storytelling that could not be reached based on the status of

knowledge in each of the disciplines alone. Conventional studies of indirect information subsidies have concentrated on transactions where professional sources offer materials in the form of written texts, images, and video footage and have not been able to grasp the strategic use of real persons and their ability to deliver authentic but modulated personal experiences. As for the tradition of political science-based studies of lobbying and legislative subsidies, it has largely ignored the strategic role of lay storytelling beyond the bottom-up voices of citizens' initiatives. Furthermore, whereas sociological-oriented studies of social movements and humanitarian NGOs have revealed the importance of worthy victims and storytelling, this research has not related the phenomenon to a broader field of interest groups and how corporate interests and citizen groups enter into alliances in a market of information where lay voices can be traded for other organizational resources. Finally, while both journalism studies and exemplar theory provide vital theoretical leverage to the claim that personal stories have a unique epistemic value both for journalists and interest groups, they have not discerned the embedded liaisons and relations involved in the triangle-shaped connections between journalists, the communication staff of interest groups—and the lay voices that provide live, personal storytelling

To be a useful theoretical concept, personal storytelling as valuable information needs to be spelled out systematically in a synthesized form. This synthesis should differentiate it from other types of personal stories in the media and other types of information subsidies. It should also hypothesize when and under what circumstances this resource will be part of the communication strategies of interest groups and decision-makers. To qualify as a strategic information subsidy, personal storytelling should conform to the following criteria:

**First**, the laypersons and their stories should be recruited, selected, prepped, and crafted to adapt to and serve the strategic aims of organizational stakeholders with special interests beyond those of the individuals in focus. Suitable personal exemplars are selected based on their ability to make an impact—that is, how they score high regarding moral and emotional appeal and the dramaturgy of their stories, rather than how representative they are of the groups or the interests they serve. Such storytellers tend to be charismatic or photogenic. They are unambiguous regarding moral qualities and innocence. Their stories wield emotional power in appealing to the audience's moral instincts, sense of justice, and feelings of righteous anger and hope.

**Second**, lay storytelling is a *live* subsidy, which means that the story appears to be owned by the storyteller and needs to be communicated by him or her directly in different fora, on various platforms, and in diverse genres and formats. This means that a ready-made interview or footage alone will not suffice as a live subsidy. The real person must be willing and able to share his or her story with reporters and decision-makers. The right lay storyteller will be able to communicate her real-life experience with a fine-tuned modulation of expressive feelings, not too much, not too little.

**Third**, organizational stakeholders can comprise a wide range of interest groups and political organizations, but certain groups can gain organizational leverage through their access to suitable personal exemplars. Access to attractive storytellers can strengthen interest groups that lack other organizational resources. Interest groups might (a) participate in transactions with journalists and gain publicity through the provision of laypersons with stories to tell. However, they could also (b) form alliances with other interest groups that possess other attractive resources (economic, professional, expert knowledge) but lack direct access to suitable exemplars or (c) use exemplars as direct information subsidies vis-à-vis decision-makers in both blame games and strategic boasting.

**Fourth**, storytelling will be a valuable ingredient in strategic communication, first and foremost, if a policy problem or an issue is discussed in public and the media. Public attention will induce interest groups to appeal to the common good and to align their special interests with worthy causes. Lay storytelling is superior to accomplish this since such stories are regarded as both credible and engaging to the extent that they mobilize the audience and their feelings in a way that experts cannot do.

## Conclusion

This article has conceptualized lay personal storytelling as a vital yet under-researched form of *information subsidy*. The key theoretical takeaway is that in a media landscape where attention, credibility, and legitimacy are scarce resources, access to real ordinary persons with the right personal stories to tell is a distinct and powerful form of informational goods for interest groups seeking to impact the audience in general and decision-makers in particular. The article has addressed the following aims: (1) Theorize why lay storytelling has vital advantages compared to other types of information subsidies. (2) Hypothesize how interest groups will select laypersons with useful stories, modulate stories to fit different contexts and augment their impacts, exchange personal stories for other communicational resources, and pitch them to media professionals and decision-makers based on the logic of a human-interest economy.

The theory of live information subsidies, as conceptualized here, extends Gandy's (1982) original theory by connecting it to hitherto separate research literatures on the role of the lay personal voice in the media and in public debate. To substantiate the theoretical claim that personal storytelling has become a key asset for strategic interests, the paper has referred to societal macroprocesses linked to media technology and media institutions (Chadwick 2013), openness and democratic debate (Schudson 2015), and changes in the functioning of modern organizations (Bromley and Meyer 2017), which have all increased the presence and impacts of lay voices and personal experiences. At the microlevel, the theory relies on both exemplar theory and experimental studies that demonstrate the comparative stronger impact of lay personal stories versus other communication strategies (Brosius 2003) and journalism studies that demonstrate how the personal voice in the news is accredited a special authenticity

and truth-claim (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). Based on this theoretical synthesis, the article provides new answers to a key question in political communication, that is how information is used strategically to influence public knowledge, beliefs, and political action and decision-making.

A vital question remains. Why is the strategic use of personal storytelling—that is, the pitching of real-life individuals willing to (re)tell their personal experiences—so scantily researched in political and strategic communication studies? Why have prior analyses not to a larger degree undertaken an in-depth exploration of the provision of real ordinary persons who are willing to share their histories in their own voices and words with journalists and decision-makers? A possible explanation is that published personal accounts often do not reveal the organizational backstage preparations and negotiations behind the stories. As mentioned, exemplar theory predicts that it is precisely the status of ordinary people in the news and in public debate, as seemingly unaffiliated and void of any interests beyond their own personal claims, that imbue them with their persuasive force (Lefevere et al. 2012). A consequence is that traditional quantitative surveys and content analysis prove insufficient. To lay bare the often tacit and embedded relations between interest groups and lay voices in the media and in democratic debate, in-depth, ethnographic, and observational case studies are called for, and they are few and far between compared to other types of research designs (see, e.g., Raknes 2023). More precisely, a special form of in-depth study that traces the manifestation of personal storytelling as it appears in published stories in the media and how they are adopted and slightly modulated on different platforms, on organization's own web pages, in social media, and in the news is called for, combined with ethnographic approaches that follow the antecedent source relations, organizational liaisons, and communication strategies that lie behind these textual manifestations.

Overall, there is a need for more research on the role of live information subsidies in different fields and contexts. An important question in need of further investigation concerns the scope and variation of the use of live information subsidies across sectors, media models, and countries. Here, the illustrative example has been the policy field of health and medicine, which arguably involves a wide range of afflicted laypersons. Prospective studies should examine strategic communication and lobbying beyond this field, for example, in sectors related to the environment, climate, and energy, where lay consequence experts and citizen activism can lend legitimacy to corporate interests and professional organizations. Additionally, all types of policy fields where NGOs, professional organizations, and corporate interests interact and where consequences for ordinary citizens are involved propose themselves as relevant objects of study.

How interest groups combine live information subsidies with conventional expert informational lobbying and how communication strategies vary depending on the media system and the political system also need further research. For instance, it could be hypothesized that the use of lay personal storytelling would be stronger in a media system where human-interest stories are more dominant, in a system with a large public sector where claims to public welfare are substantial, and in general, in

countries where social movements and NGOs have strong legitimacy and a comparatively high standing in the corporate system. It would also be worthwhile to study how the regulation of commercials, such as the ban on advertisements for medicines, plays out regarding the use of lay storytelling that can work as an efficient substitute for paid content.

Both powerful interest groups and reporters might share an interest in preserving the appealing picture of the “raw,” authentic, and brave individual struggling alone, free from organizational connections and ties. Nevertheless, as substantiated in this article, the storyteller might be selected, and the storytelling modulated and pitched to the media and decision-makers by interest groups. Such strategies are not illegitimate in themselves. On the contrary, the voices of ordinary people—in a world characterized by inequality and the lack of social justice—are of paramount importance. The argument made here is that in a media landscape where the presence and impacts of emotional, provocative, and even polarizing personal stories are greater than ever, the need for scrutiny and critical research is urgent, also concerning this for of claim-making. The personal interest of the lay individual stepping forward might very well overlap with the interest of the organization behind the person. However, the audience should be made aware of these liaisons in the name of transparency and informed deliberation. Importantly, more transparency is called for to reveal if and when the organization or corporation behind the personal story works to accomplish objectives that, at the end of the day, serve quite different interests than the welfare of the lay protagonist in focus.

Finally, victimhood stories of personal suffering and injustice are occasionally proven utterly false, sometimes long after the media frenzy is over. This might not be the typical case, but at a time when fake news and distrust in the news are high on the agenda, both reporters’ and researchers’ renewed scrutiny of the strategic use of personal storytelling in the media is strongly warranted.

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### **Notes**

1. Overweight mom loses 40LBS on Wegovy in “life-changing” transformation, Nov. 11, 2023. <http://Daily Mail Online>



2. Medisinen hjalp Tor Erik Hagen ned 23 kilo på 10 måneder. Nå mister han og flere tusen andre offentlig støtte, Nov. 11, 2023. <http://aftenposten.no>
3. Ozempic Before and After: Wegovy, Nov. 11, 2023. <http://today.com>
4. Obesity through the lens: the truth from within, 2023.11.12. <http://novonordisk.com>

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